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Sociological Knowledge and Transformation at ‘Diversity

University’, UK

Celia Jenkins, University of Westminster, UK; Caroline Barnes, University of Westminster UK; Monica McLean, University of Nottingham UK; Andrea Abbas, University of Bath, UK and Paul Ashwin, Lancaster University, UK.

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ABSTRACT

‘Diversity University’ is a large university in London, UK, which appears in the bottom-third of national league tables and provides education for poorer students, often from ethnic minority groups. The Sociology Department at Diversity was the focus of research exploring quality and inequality in undergraduate degrees and here, with concrete examples, we discuss how its curriculum and pedagogy can be conceptualised as socially just. Concepts drawn from the work of the sociologist of education Basil Bernstein are employed to justify challenging students to make the necessary effort to bring difficult, abstract sociological knowledge into juxtaposition with everyday problems of life and society. In this way, tutors offer a quality of education that is equivalent to any in high-status universities;and, by way of knowledge acquisition, support relatively disadvantaged students to access what Bernstein calls ‘pedagogic rights’ to individual enhancement, social inclusion and political participation.

Introduction

The case of the sociology department in ‘Diversity University’ shows how sociology knowledge can transform the lives of students often described as ‘non-traditional’. The research from which the case is drawn investigated curriculum and pedagogy in four departments offering sociology-related degrees in universities positioned differently in UK league tables. The ‘Pedagogic quality and inequality in university first degrees’ project (2008-2012)ⁱ explored the relationship between university reputation, pedagogic quality and curriculum knowledge with the aim of generating definitions of pedagogic justice for all studentsⁱⁱ.

It should be noted that of the five authors, the last three (McLean, Abbas and Ashwin) were research investigators, while Jenkins and Barnes took part in the research as sociology lecturers at Diversity University. So below, first the research team provides a brief background to the case of socially-just pedagogy offered here, in terms of the UK’s hierarchical higher education system; and, then contextualizes the case within the broader research project, including the introduction of relevant analytical concepts. The main part of the chapter is an account of developing socially-just pedagogies at Diversity written by Jenkins and Barnes. This account is in two parts: first, the context in which a review of the sociology degree was undertaken is outlined, including a discussion of how ‘socially-just pedagogy’ was conceptualized; and, secondly, an exegesis of the degree’s curriculum content and pedagogic practices. The research team contributes a brief conclusion.

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Background to the case of socially-just pedagogy at Diversity University

Inequities in UK Higher Education

In the UK, the higher education system is stratified. There is a broad dichotomy between ex-polytechnic ‘new’ universities, which are designated to be ‘teaching intensive’, and ‘old’ universities, which are designated ‘research intensive’, and the latter are wealthier and more prestigious than the former. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have places in high-status universities (Boliver, 2011, 2013). The costs of university education are greater for poorer students: they are more likely to take on employment to finance their studies (Callender, 2008); and, to have personal or financial problems (ibid.), and not to complete their studies (Quinn, 2004). Compared to middle-class students, when working-class and women students leave university they are disadvantaged in the labour market and in postgraduate education and training (Hussain et al. 2009). League tables compound disadvantage by combining indicators of pedagogic quality with other indicators that depend on institutional status and wealth, for example, higher or lower entry qualifications and staff-student ratios (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012). Systematic inequities in the experience of university have also been uncovered. The theories of Pierre Bourdieu have been used in small-scale studies to show how high-status universities’ structures and processes exclude the ‘habitus’ of working-class and ethnic-minority students who feel they don’t belong; while in the lower-status universities, where they feel more at home, they are intellectually under-challenged and regard themselves as at second-rate universities (Crozier and Reay 2011; Reay et al 2009).

The ‘Pedagogic quality and inequality’ research project (2008-2012)

Two main aims of the project were to challenge taken-for-granted judgements about ‘quality’, especially those that assume that students gain a better education at higher-status universities, and, to conceptualize ‘socially-just’ university pedagogy for all students. To achieve these aims the research team chose to investigate the teaching of undergraduate sociology-related social science in four universities of different status. The reasons for focusing on sociology were (1) university sociology is taken up by all socio-economic classes; (2) it is a discipline that historically pursues social and moral ambition which assisted an exploration of the contribution of university education to individuals and society beyond economic goals; and, (3) the members of the research team teach and research sociology or sociology of education and so were in a better position than if they did not to make judgements about sociology education.

Pseudonyms were chosen for the universities to reflect their character: ‘Prestige’ and ‘Selective’ regularly appear in the top third of national league tables ranking universities, while ‘Community’ and ‘Diversity’ regularly appear in the bottom third. Diversity University is located in a large, multi-cultural English inner city; and, the pseudonym reflects its student intake which tends to come from local, lower socio-economic and/or ethnic minority groups. The sociology degree at Diversity is showcased here because its pedagogic quality was found to confound league table rankings. For example, in a survey of over 700 students in all four universities Diversity ranked first of the four on the scale ‘A change in personal identity and an intention to change society for the better’; second on the ‘Engagement with academic knowledge scale; and, first on the ‘Good teaching’ scale.

British sociologist of education Basil Bernstein (1924-2000) provided the project with a robust theoretical framework for exploring what might constitute socially-just curriculum and pedagogy. Broadly, his extensive oeuvre theorizes that it is possible to chart how formal education distributes knowledge, usually in ways which reproduce society's hierarchies. The social justice goal of the project motivated a focus on the converse possibility of university education disrupting the hierarchies by teaching so that students acquire 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2008). Diversity illustrates this possibility.

There is not enough space here to explain the full range of Bernsteinian concepts. So here are briefly introduced those concepts Jenkins and Barnes employ to make their account below of the sociology degree at Diversity, namely, pedagogic rights, horizontal and vertical discourses, and visible and invisible pedagogies. Access to 'pedagogic rights' can be conceptualised as educational outcomes. The three pedagogic rights that Bernstein (2000) proposes are to: individual enhancement (being a critical and confident person); social inclusion (having a sense of belonging in society); and, political participation (being an active member of a democracy). From Bernstein's perspective, access to these rights comes by acquiring the type of knowledge which allows an individual to think about and change her or his life. In earlier work, he distinguishes between 'horizontal discourse' used for transmitting and acquiring 'commonsense everyday knowledge [about] common problems of living and dying.' (1999, p. 159); and 'vertical discourse' which is the discourse of abstract disciplinary knowledge and in the humanities and social sciences takes the form of 'a series of specialised languages [for example, post-modernism, feminism and so on] with specialised modes of interrogation and specialised criteria for the

production and circulation of texts' (ibid.). For Bernstein (1999) the use of horizontal discourse in classrooms to engage the 'less able' students denies them access to the type of knowledge that vertical discourse provides, which lifts their minds from their local contexts. Nevertheless, he does concede the possibility of creating a 'discursive gap' between the two forms of discourse where new, original, transforming knowledge can emerge because there is dissonance between the abstractions of vertical discourse and understandings of empirical realities (Bernstein, 2000). This is the achievement Jenkins and Barnes describe. Moreover, they show how opening this gap depends on making explicit or 'visible' to students what is expected of them. For Bernstein (1975) 'invisible pedagogies' which leave expectations and 'rules' and much else implicit, benefit middle-class class learners who have been enculturated into what is expected in formal educational settings. Arguably, this observation holds particularly in universities where the degree of control and guidance is considerably less than in school and for students whose family members have no familiarity with universities.

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So overall in the account of socially-just pedagogies below, Jenkins and Barnes highlight enhancement, inclusion and participation as basic rights for their students. The means of access to these rights are, to use Bernstein's term, the 'recontextualisation' of sociological knowledge in curriculum and pedagogy that foreground a principled juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal discourses and make explicit to students the kinds of efforts necessary to develop a powerful sociological identity. The account starts with reflections on the importance of addressing relevant issues in the political and institutional contexts in which socially-just pedagogies are thought about and operationalized.

Socially-Just Pedagogies at Diversity University: An account by lecturers

Jenkins and Barnes

This case study represents how we built our sociology curriculum, and through that, how we fostered specific identities in our students. We also explain how we theorised and formalized what we did. It was our participation in the project ‘Pedagogic quality and inequality in first degrees’ that moved us from half-articulated beliefs about the power of thinking sociologically towards a theoretically informed account of our teaching via the Bernsteinian framework of pedagogic rights [adopted](#) by McLean, et al. (2013a). We now see our approach as an ongoing process of connecting horizontal and vertical educational discourses and one that challenges the sense that they are oppositional.

We begin here with some context to the overhaul of our curriculum, which began with our own research into changes in our student profile and how it impacted on our teaching and then fed into our preparation for a forthcoming revalidation in 2008. We address the specific issues [revalidation](#) raised for us and how we responded to them within a rapidly transforming higher education context. This will be followed by examples of the pedagogic solutions, which we have tried to capture here in terms of forging a new discursive space between the vertical and the horizontal discourses (Bernstein, 1977).

Contextualising and conceptualising socially-just pedagogies

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For us then, the preparations that re-validation required allowed us to engage deeply with the sector-wide move towards visible pedagogies. An issue of singular import for us was the threat of the Post '92 sector operationalizing visible pedagogies in ways that 'dumb down' the curriculum. We thought that visible pedagogic strategies were at risk of being diluted within the accompanying policy moves toward employability (or a degree for work) and the pressures of marketization. It is by rendering explicit the activities entailed in engaging with vertical discourses, while maintaining these activities as academically challenging and credible, that we have drawn together the vertical and horizontal discourses and, in so doing, go some way towards achieving a socially-just pedagogy.

Clearly, the HE sector in the UK has undergone significant re-structuring in recent decades, marked as it is by the acceleration of marketization, the widening participation agenda, increased student numbers and the employability and skills agenda (Ransome, 2011; David, 2011; Munene, 2009). The extent and nature of these changes are mediated through the institutional culture of each university and one's own experience of teaching and learning. For us, the coming together of a large number of factors fed into the construction of a new curriculum and pedagogy.

Particularly important were:

1. The sector-wide move to the discourse of learning aims and outcomes, best encapsulated in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Sociology subject benchmarks (QAA, 2007). Their purpose is to render explicit the learning requirements that students were traditionally assumed to know and, in a sense, counter the class prerogative Bernstein understood to operate within such

implicit forms of discourse (Bernstein, 1977). QAA bench marking could be operationalized into a set of instrumental learning aims and outcomes, which might be described as visible pedagogy, but also limit pedagogy to a set of instructions on how to pass. Instead we asked how bench marking might be operationalized to show students how to acquire the tools of academic engagement and ways of thinking freely within the vertical discourse (Bernstein, 2000; McLean et al, 2013a). The risk was that visibility would lead to the intrinsic qualities of the vertical discourse being ‘dumbed down’ into the horizontal discourse only. As Bernstein puts it, vertical discourse becomes ‘colonised’ [1999, p. 171] by horizontal discourse.

2. The rise of the employability agenda that potentially prioritized education for work above wider humanist values of education (DPIS, 2011; Ball, 1990). Potentially this trend extends the instrumentalization of teaching and learning. Reflecting the wider discourses of skills as the new adjudicator of pedagogic quality, Diversity demanded that every course have a ‘Work Experience’ module and every **module iproforma** include a statement of transferable skills **in its learning outcomes**. We suspect that the impact of this agenda has been felt disproportionately in the Post-‘92 sector.

3. Substantial changes in our student population from 1996-2004. We experienced the doubling of student numbers and the virtual collapse of **mature students** **due to the recession, which was reflected across the HE sector**^{iv}. The ethnic demographic shifted rapidly also from 53% White to 52% Asian, of whom almost half were Muslim and the gender distribution of predominantly women students increased further from 75 to 85% (Jenkins et

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al, 2009). Meanwhile staffing was halved with a significant effect on our workload.

4. The consideration of the new National Student Satisfaction (NSS) ratings which construct students as consumers of education (Molesworth et al, 2009), the logic of which we conceived to be antithetical to our politics of an emancipatory educational agenda (Barnes and Jenkins, 2014).

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Thus our teaching conditions were rapidly and substantially changing, causing us to question whether our teaching was fit for purpose. One consequence of the changing conditions, namely ever increasing class sizes, was the depersonalisation of relationships with the students in the classroom. As a result, we conducted our own inward-facing research to map our sense of what the shifting student population and their learning cultures brought to the classrooms, as well as to critique our own practice within sociology (Jenkins et al, 2009). Through interviews and focus group discussions with the teaching team, it became clear that three main themes influenced our understanding of our teaching experiences and our pedagogic principles.

Firstly, and most strikingly, was that our own educational and intellectual biographies motivated a desire to replicate in our students the intellectual and personal transformation that studying sociology had entailed for us. The team described a visceral sense of having become different social and intellectual beings as a result of engaging deeply with what it takes to think sociologically, and thus to think about the world within the vocabularies of the vertical discourses. We were politically committed to carry forward this powerful knowledge to our students.

Secondly, we felt passionate about our teaching but also increasingly disconnected from students by the widening chasm between our social and cultural capital and theirs. The ethnic make-up of the classroom was changing rapidly, the demographics altered almost overnight, so that we found ourselves bereft of a mutual cultural repertoire and thus struggled to relate concepts and theories to examples of interest or familiarity. In a sense, we recognized that we were calling upon our 'lifeworld' (Abbas and McLean, 2003) as a frame of reference instead of theirs and it felt as if we were short-changing them.

Thirdly, we struggled with what we perceived as the students' increasing instrumentalism, expressed through them wanting a 2.1 classification in order to get a good job. Instead of having our passion reflected back to us, we felt that we met a wall of silence as students attempted to pick from our content what they thought was required for the right answer and increasingly came to treat the instructions in the module handbooks as sacred.

What emerged then from our research and collaborative team discussions was the explicit need to recontextualize the sociology curriculum so that it both placed the students' lifeworld rather than ours at the heart of what we did and encouraged the students to treat their own lifeworlds as objects of analysis so that they could begin to render the familiar strange. Collaboration with the research project further emphasized the importance for us of the transformative capacity that thinking sociologically entails.

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This approach and our response to the transformations we were experiencing both externally and internally went some way to alleviate our fear that operationalization of the policy to deploy explicit pedagogic strategies might dumb down our curriculum. If teaching was based on what the students knew, there was a risk that we would end up simply reproducing the everyday, rather than subjecting it to critical scrutiny. We wanted to engage students through their lifeworlds but also to achieve an academic orientation and personal transformation. Emphasis was thus placed upon academic rigour to assist in bringing about the reconceptualization of experience, which we believe to be so vital. Although we did not articulate it in this way at the time, we were trying to merge the horizontal and vertical discourses, so that students treat their lifeworlds as potential objects of analysis and critique, thereby centralising the transformative impact of thinking sociologically about society and their place within it.

We addressed this endeavour in two main ways. Firstly, by integrating the core activities of theory and methods throughout the degree, thereby inevitably incorporating into all modules high level and highly employable graduate attributes and, secondly, by building analysis up from everyday experiences. We require students to do academic research from the outset, the pinnacle of which is their final year dissertations, which we fought hard to keep against pressure from other subject areas to drop it because it was deemed too challenging for the sort of students we recruit. After all, students like ours, with relatively low entry requirements are assumed not to 'read' a degree but need it to be simplified and taught to them.

It was within this overall context and struggle that we produced and continue to re-evaluate the curriculum framework that we will now outline. We have chosen to do this by working through a few examples in some detail to illustrate how our degree deploys socially-just pedagogies. In the process, we were fortunate that the ‘Pedagogic quality and inequality’ project evaluated the impact of these changes addressing both ours and students’ perspectives.

Examples of how socially- just pedagogy is embedded within a sociology curriculum

We designed the curriculum by moving from the descriptive to the analytical level. This approach reverses traditional university pedagogy that assumes students can develop analysis by starting from abstraction. We begin with the students’ initial understandings of their experience and, from that, bring concepts to bear on their experiences and invite them to re-evaluate them in the light of concepts or other kinds of abstraction. Thus we establish a context where vertical discourse is derived from the horizontal instead of being replaced by it, requiring students to engage in a dialogue between them that has often proven to be confrontational. What flows from this is the recognition that rather than having to bolt-on skills^{vi}, they are, in fact, intrinsic to doing sociology properly. For example, research requires high-level graduate attributes. Therefore, we render the skills more visible and explicit as a way of operationalizing the wider move to an explicit pedagogy in our teaching practice. Contrary to ‘dumbing down’ by bolting on ‘skills’, we are ‘clevering- up’ the curriculum by centralising highly prized graduate attributes, which are transferable across multiple employment sectors.

The new programme focuses on being both research-led and on doing research. In this way, students build up sociological knowledge by starting from their own interests and experience. The first assessment^{vii} of the first year ‘Researching Society’ module is to photograph something that represents the city to them and to present it to the class, thereby introducing ideas around identity as well as skills of observation and application of visual methods of deconstructing images and presentation skills. This assignment is then returned to later as an assessment for another core module, ‘Thinking Sociologically’ in which students revisit the image to provide a more analytical account in the light of relevant concepts like belonging, representations, cities and so on, which they acquire throughout the year. Thus, they are required to engage reflexively from the beginning of their degree with their initial thoughts (horizontal discourse) and what happens to them when concepts (vertical discourse) are brought to bear on them. Both the core modules of ‘Thinking Sociologically’ and ‘Researching Society’ run alongside a third, ‘Self and Society’, which addresses identity issues, thus requiring students to make theoretical connections across modules, which they bring together in their end of year exams.

So from the beginning of their degree students analyse their everyday lives and denaturalize the taken-for-grantedness of their experience; for example, challenging the presumption of heteronormativity via ethical conduct in the classroom. One unintended benefit of larger classes is using their anonymity to mention the likelihood that at least one student is not ‘out’ about their sexuality and use this point to consider the pressures of heteronormativity. We conclude therefore that to discuss in class individual experiences is necessarily to examine formations of power and, in doing

so, we use sociological knowledge to re-conceptualize how students might understand their experiences.

Our first year teaching is as much infused by our own research interests as the option modules. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of teaching and research in two ways. Firstly, it conveys a sense of the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1970) as a way of life in demonstrating how much of ourselves we invest in sociological research. Secondly, our research adds to the distinctiveness of the programme and enables students to learn by example from our specialist expertise. For example, 'Thinking Sociologically' approaches sociological knowledge, concepts and perspectives through topics like obesity, religion and the environment, which reflect staff research interests. This module replaced more conventional 'Classical Theory' or 'Introduction to British Society' modules. Similarly, the options available to first years lay the foundational knowledge for options in the same areas in the second and third years. One example is the theme of gender, which starts with 'Introduction to Women's Studies' (renamed as 'Introducing Gender') in the first year and is picked up again in the third year with 'Contemporary Gender Studies: Feminist Theory and Beyond'. Of course, gender is addressed within other modules too: from feminist critiques of classical theory to how gender structures the experience of migration. These strategies allow early knowledge to be excavated in greater depth at a more advanced level, thereby encouraging an ethos of continuity in knowledge.

Moreover, our curriculum aims to demonstrate how foundational concepts underpin analysis across broad areas of social life; how theories are fluid; and how some concepts have limited utility under ever-evolving social conditions. This approach

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conveys a sense that knowledge and concepts are constantly reviewed and refined to counter the assumption that they are finite: to be learnt, assessed and then forgotten. Critical to a sense of maintaining an academic ethos, and extending its difficulty and scope as students progress, was getting them to engage with primary texts in sociological theory, so we moved 'Classical Sociological Theory' from the first to the second year in order to achieve this.

For us, research methods best encapsulate our approach to both curriculum and pedagogy. We had consistently and painfully failed to engage students' interest through the whistle-stop lecture tour of different methods and related seminar exercises, however interactive we made the experience. Through collaborative discussion, we established, in essence, what it is we want them to know about methodology and research practice. In short, we 'unstuffed' the curriculum and rejected the text-book approach which presents understanding methods as being familiar with technical elements without knowing what is crucial to them. What tends to be missing is the messy experience of the practical. Textbooks don't lead the students into what problems can be encountered and thus have to be struggled with. Without this experience, engagement with epistemological problems that are inherent to any form of data interpretation are not really encountered, but rather remain largely theoretical (Barnes and Jenkins, 2013). So, across the academic year, we give the students two research tasks only: 1) an unstructured depth interview with someone they know about their experience of school, work or family life; and, 2) a secondary data analysis of a government survey of their choice.

We have been genuinely surprised by how much students learn from this approach: they have a better grasp than previously of the contrast between qualitative and quantitative data, which challenges their epistemological assumptions about the superior knowledge claims associated with quantitative data. We start intentionally with the qualitative [interview](#) so that students' understanding of the complexities of interpretive methodologies can later be compared with quantitative data that does not match its explanatory power. Moreover, students begin with an undeclared prejudice that the interview is a lot like a recorded bit of everyday chat but as they engage with the processes of coding they begin to bring the foundational categories of sociology to bear on the talk so that they start to treat it as data and relate it to social phenomena.

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Thus we found that by 'unstuffing' the methods curriculum, we expanded different aspects of methodology far more successfully through workshops than could ever have been achieved in lectures. As part of our inclusive pedagogy, we are committed to the dialogic form of the workshop as central to our delivery, with students engaging with us in an exchange of thinking and talking. They are more confident in this exchange because they are doing the research and have things to say about it. We also get students to engage more closely through using and reusing a smaller range of materials as 'ideal- types' of how to do research well. As an example of this, we take an extract of an interview on school discipline by Burgess (1991), which he opens by asking a boy who is frequently in trouble what his views are on the subject (see extract below).

Burgess (1991, p.112)

Unstructured Interview

Commentary

RB: What happens when anybody
does anything really bad here there?

This section of the interview starts with a
general descriptive question using my
terms.

Sean: You mean when people get
into trouble?

The pupil defines it in his terms and
seeks re-assurance from me.

RB: Yes

We work with this ideal-type interview in different ways as students proceed through the stages of designing, conducting and analysing their own interview. In the opening weeks, we work together with the students on how to construct an interview guide using the Burgess extract as a guide to what kind of data the interview is aiming to produce. We start by asking students how the opening question works in this extract. It allows them to see how Sean defines 'anything really bad', which exposes the definitional properties the boy is bringing to the action. It also shows what an open-ended question looks like and how it can function, exposing the layers of interpretation embedded in any transcript. We conclude this workshop by focusing their attention on structuring open-ended questions to develop their own interview guides.

At the data analysis stage, students reread the extract to identify themes and code them. They compare the themes they identify with issues raised in the interview and are alert to the possibility of grounded theory if and when new themes emerged. The process of coding and classifying data clarifies definitions, operationalizes concepts and sets boundaries and this raises the level of analysis in their own work. As well as the substantive content of the interview, students examine the emotional script and what it meant for Sean to identify himself as one of the troublemakers, and we use it to alert students to the inevitability of contradiction: Sean is both proud in terms of his bravado and ashamed of his behaviour with certain co-participants like his parents. Finally, we direct students to go through the commentary, which accompanies the transcript and explains how the data is being clarified, interpreted, followed up and validated. At this point, they think about what explanations they can add to their own interview transcripts. From a short extract of text much can be gained in terms of the move from the practical to the epistemological.

Through establishing the practice of doing research in the first year, we constantly attend to the processes of abstraction, conceptualisation and theorisation associated with vertical discourse. The students also learn about the importance of advance planning, the difficulties of asking questions and managing the process. Moreover, they discover how long it takes to transcribe their interview, [and](#) about being consistent in assigning segments of data to categories and about interpreting codes. For those students who normally adhere to the descriptive level and struggle to engage analytically, this exercise facilitates learning how to interpret and evaluate data, connecting abstract concepts with topics derived from their everyday lifeworlds. Conversely, those students who normally start from the more abstract level are

required to operationalize abstract concepts into the nitty-gritty of everyday life and to formulate appropriate open questions.

Overall, students are surprised that the seemingly simple act of conducting an interview can be so complex and they enjoy the challenge, taking pride in their achievement. They also acquire invaluable transferable skills, which are integral to the activity rather than bolted-on. Inasmuch as their interviews are about everyday experiences, some provide fertile ideas for the final year dissertation. Certainly, the method is favoured above all others by dissertation students for the richness of the data produced. In the detailed attention to interpretive knowledge, we challenge the ideology of objectivity as explanatory when it is mostly descriptive. By engaging in the mechanics of research practice, far more complex theorisation can flow and in this respect, the horizontal and vertical may not be as difficult to reconcile in educational settings as Bernstein (1999) appears to imply.

A further aspect of our inclusive pedagogy is that the academic curriculum is delivered through a diversification of teaching and assessment methods, which is distinctive to our course. It still draws on students' experience of 'doing things' first to provide the building blocks for more complex conceptual analysis and is not restricted to just the core modules as it works for options too. McLean et al. (2013a) pick up on Bernstein's apparent prediction that lower-status universities might display characteristics of personalisation which prevent their students from accessing vertical discourses. Personalisation is expressed both through the curriculum focus on personal experience and the caring about and supporting of students (McLean et al, 2013a). However, working with personal narratives can facilitate greater self and

sociological understanding which transcend these perceived limitations. As Deakin-Crick (2009) points out, when students are conceptualized as active learners and collaborate with teachers, they engage in a pedagogic journey of self-authoring through reading and self-reflection.

An account has been published about how we used autobiographical methods to develop students' understandings of their social class position (Jenkins et al., 2011)^{viii}. The module, 'Gender and Education', requires students to apply autobiographical methods to their gendered experience of school, adopting an intersectional approach to include other dimensions of difference. The assignment forces them to move between the vernacular of the everyday (horizontal discourse) and the academic vernacular of theorising (vertical discourse). Most of the students start by assuming that gender had nothing to do with their schooling, unaware of how school shapes and regulates their gendered identities, but gradually they change their minds as they look back on their school days through the sociological gaze, allowing transformations in self-understandings that enable them to see their experiences differently (McLean et al, 2015).

The students emerge from the fusion of sociological and self-understanding with a new critical identity, one that sees them locate power and social processes in the experiences they research. For example, one student had experienced unwanted sexual touching by her economics teacher when at FE college and at the time had felt it must have been her fault. However, when she read about sexual harassment in schools, she re-evaluated the experience and her feelings about it (Jenkins et al, 2011). Moreover, not only do the students experience the emotion of subjecting that

experience to reinterpretation, but also the intellectual activity puts them into a different emotional space, which can be unsettling and difficult but can also help students to understand the power dynamics involved and as a result transform a 'private trouble' into a 'public issue' (Mills, 1970).

This example of engaging students in pedagogic activity can be troubling for students in another way: the instrumental outlook of some of our students is hard to sustain when they are being asked to explore their personal lifeworlds. Moreover the associated anguish does not readily translate into high levels of student satisfaction, operationalized as it is through the consumerist framework of module evaluations; nevertheless, our observation is that students enjoy the challenge and ultimately find the hard work we encourage rewarding. Moreover, in 2014-15 the degree achieved 100% in the National Student Satisfaction survey (NSS) making it the highest ranking degree in London and amongst a handful nationwide^{ix}. Despite our reservations about the validity of this scoring of student satisfaction, arguably our students appreciate the challenge that the vertical discourse requires of them and are seeking more than the consumerist logic of an instructional discourse.

A further key feature of our socially-just pedagogy is the integration of modules across core and options so that they cross-reference each other, which is an expression of our commitment to academic rigour. We expect students to draw on the intersection between the modules as part of their engagement with their learning. By way of illustration: autobiography is used again in the option 'Body and Society' to flesh out the relationship between wider social structural forces and individual action. Fussell's autobiography (1991) tells a story of his life as a bodybuilder and his voice

Commented [MW12]: was it the only one to achieve 100?

is directly drawn upon to introduce ‘ontological insecurity’ endemic to high modernity (Giddens, 1991). We use his narrative to explore how his body project was a means to cope with his struggle to understand who he was in a rapidly changing world.

Still drawing on the same module, a further example of making connections between modules arose when students are asked to re-engage with Marxist ideas of exploitation, irrational markets and alienation through a class on organ trading. Here they reflect on how an organ comes to have a ‘price’ and in the process to problematize their understanding of ‘race’ by considering the direction of flow of organs from donors to the recipients who can afford them, thereby challenging the ideas of the ‘raced body’ as categorically objective and genetically grounded. We prioritize the need to synthesize and interrelate modules, which runs counter to a more explicit pedagogy where modules are treated as discrete.

Finally, the prime example of the academic orientation of the degree is the final year dissertation. It is the pinnacle of the students’ achievement and retained because it is central to the academic ethos of the degree. Students frequently choose a topic that in some way relates to their life experience. Many of our students find sociology challenges their religious beliefs and generally manage to keep them separate although some religious practices do spill over into their academic work. For example, in the past, students have written their dissertations about their own religion without being able to establish critical distance from their sacred texts. This resulted in them describing their beliefs as the truth and not engaging with sociological critiques. However, more recently, one student wrote an excellent dissertation on

religion in which she interviewed sociology students who identified as religious, on how studying sociology affected their beliefs. One finding was that in order to get good marks some students reported that they wrote their theory essays in politically correct sociological terms, acknowledging the social origins of religion and endorsing Marxist critiques. Some were troubled by the sociological explanations of the social origins of religion and struggled to reconcile them with their beliefs, which had forced them to confront them analytically. In the ensuing analysis, the student concludes that she adheres to her religious worldview despite what she has learnt in sociology. However, at the very point at which she declares a greater allegiance to her religion, she demonstrates her capacity to think sociologically and in its own terms. This example illustrates the tension we recognize between the horizontal and vertical discourses: students often operate by moving between different lifeworlds. So it is in this sense that we emphasize the notion of discursive space rather than synthesis and, in doing so, mean to keep in sight the tensions between the vertical and horizontal discourses.

However, the capacity to occupy a discursive space requires the acquisition of a critical faculty and the ability to switch between these discourses. We see this as an expression of students' pedagogic rights (Bernstein, 1996) to evaluate and accept or dismiss different perspectives. Even if we find that students do not embrace our ways of being sociological and the extent to which it informs our lifeworlds, we are proud that they leave our courses as critical agents (Barnes and Jenkins, 2014). [Student consistently state that they look at the world differently now and feel the course challenged and expanded their worldviews. Four student testimonials on our Sociology website testify to what doing sociology meant to them. For example, "My](#)

Commented [MW13]: evidence? student voices? **ADDED**

time at Westminster was a truly wonderful experience that not only challenged but inspired me, both academically and personally” ; and another, said:

“ I’ve left the University of Westminster with my degree, a bunch of ideas that I want to explore and my studies have made me look at everything through a sociological glass (like how men take up so much space in public areas) (<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/courses/subjects/sociology/what-our-students-say/testimonials>)”.

Like other Post- '92 universities, we have established a more personalized approach with students and have a good reputation for caring about them. [Students reported that our attention and support given to them was not matched by their](#) friends’ experience [of studying in other](#) universities. This matters to us, especially in the light of an interesting finding from McLean et al’s project (McLean et al, 2013a), namely that there is a greater likelihood of Post- '92 university students having a more ‘unsettled’ background than those attending Pre-’92 universities. Additionally, it may be as a result of beginning with students’ lives in seminars that they bring their personal troubles to us outside the classroom, which we attribute to the counter hegemonic position we assume in the classroom as a result of our commitment to a [socially-just emancipatory](#) epistemological position both in our research and teaching.

Commented [MW14]: meaning what? HAVE CHANGED TO SOCIALLY-JUST TO CLARIFY

[Beyond listening and providing academic support through the difficulties that some students face, a more integrated support network can be accessed by or for them at university level. This includes a range of services such as academic writing advice,](#)

library support, counselling, disability, faith and careers' services. We work hard to achieve this joined-up approach and see it as another important dimension of how pedagogic rights are secured through our inclusive pedagogy.

Commented [MW15]: this could be deleted or shortened in favour of including at least some student voice, given the word count limits
DONE ABOVE

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the Sociology course itself can generate considerable anxiety for students. In 'clevering-up' the curriculum, we repeatedly require students to extend their application of different conceptual frameworks by addressing new practical tasks. We make these demands on students without fully attending to the anxiety produced as they work out what is required of them to do well. In fact, we may have failed to recognize just how unsettling and challenging the course might be for some. This uncertainty is sometimes reflected in more negative student evaluations of modules with non-traditional forms of teaching, learning and assessment. Such criticisms are often accompanied by a clear preference for more traditional lectures, which are perceived as less demanding. The problem does not lie at the instructional level because, if we take the example of different assessments, any new form of assessment is always accompanied by explicit guidelines so that students know what they need to do. Instead, the problem is that we expect students frequently to shift how they approach sociological issues and their thinking. Sometimes, it is not until the dissertation stage that students put into practice the range of knowledge and skills they have acquired. It is then that they fully appreciate the transformation they have undergone through studying sociology (although it is too late to boost module evaluations). Moreover, we know from some students that the knowledge and skills they have gained from the course have inspired changes in their own lives and they approach us for support in thinking and living through the often painful decisions that such a transformation might entail. As McLean et al (2013a) astutely point out: the

pedagogy of Sociology departments in lower-status universities such as ours, can insert a 'discursive gap' to facilitate the recognition in students of what studying social science entails and to 'realise it in their lives' (McLean et al 2013a:268).

Despite our anxieties, fears and long experience of teaching sociology and the colonization of our lifeworlds under very changed times in UK higher education, teaching still brings us pleasure and we are motivated by assisting students to leave university with the ability to analyse critically their lifeworlds and be more agentic. In the dedications of their dissertations, the students talk about the personal journey they have undergone through studying sociology with a sense of disbelief in their transformation. One student commented that during her degree, "I grew more than I could ever have expected". Given our relatively disadvantaged student cohort, we encourage them to exercise their pedagogic rights, which gives them positional advantages in the labour market too. Student testimonials acknowledge that the course prepared them effectively for postgraduate studies and careers through the knowhow they had gained. A former student, one year on from completing her degree, described herself as being ahead of the game in her role in the business development team of a prestigious legal firm. She attributed this to being more analytical than her co-workers and much better at office politics because her university learning took place amongst such diverse students. In this way a relatively disadvantaged student has accessed the right to inclusion in an occupational group usually the preserve of the elites in society.

Just as that student has become more analytical about her experience, so have we through participation in the vertical discourses of the 'Pedagogic quality and

Commented [MW16]: Is part of the social justice outcome also that this student was able to move across class lines in her employment prospects?

Commented [MW17]: this could be open to different interpretations some of which may not see this as social justice outcome. is she committed for example to the public good? can you make this clearer. So, analytical to what ends??? **THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF POSITION A RELATIVELY DISADVANTAGED STUDENT IN A MORE ADVANTAGEOUS POSITION, RATHER THAN POSITIONING THE STUDENT TO DO PUBLIC GOOD, WHICH SHE MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT CHOOSE IN THIS POSITION.**

inequality' project. What we have encapsulated here is our commitment to developing a socially-just pedagogy and enhancing our students' and our own pedagogic rights. Additionally, our students have experienced their participation in the project as personally enhancing. For example, in the course of being interviewed and being asked to produce an individual education and life grid, they come to understand and articulate the impact of their habitus on their educational trajectories to a Post '92 university. There is a strong sense of pride in what we have developed in the Sociology degree at Diversity, as well as continued frustration in the current context of the pressures of academia, uncertainties about the future and the personal costs involved in the sociological enterprise.

Conclusion

Commented [MW18]: can you bring this back to the 3 pedagogic rights **DONE**

The findings of the 'Pedagogic quality and inequality' project indicate that sociology-related undergraduate courses are socially-just when they give access to the three pedagogic rights identified by Bernstein (2000). At Diversity, curriculum and pedagogy in the Sociology degree is designed to support students: to become more confident (the right to individual enhancement); to become a full member of society by way of useful contributions through work (the right to social inclusion); and to develop the critical outlook, knowledge and orientation to be an active member of a democracy (the right to political participation). From Bernstein's perspective, access to these rights comes by acquiring the type of knowledge which allows an individual to think about and change her or his life lead to personal transformation which also connects to understanding and making contributions to society. Engagement with sociological knowledge is the key. When students study hard to understand the

academic content of their courses, they experience three kinds of transformation: the knowledge they acquire is interesting and relevant to their lives; it changes the way that they understand themselves and their place in the world; and, they come to a deeper understanding of the relationships between people and society's systems and structures (McLean et al. 2013a; Ashwin et al. 2014). This chapter has taken a fine-grained, in-depth approach to show what it takes to engage students in academic knowledge.

ⁱ Funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC), Grant Number: RES-062-23-1438.

ⁱⁱ Readers interested in an overview of the project can refer to McLean et al. 2013a. McLean et al. 2013b and McLean et al. 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ [Revalidation of the degree is a university requirement every five years to monitor quality and relevance. The course team review all aspects of the curriculum and pedagogy and present the degree programme to a panel for approval.](#)

^{iv} [Mature students are over 21 who have been working or doing something else and have not gone directly to university from school.](#)

^v [The grading system in the UK runs from a first \(Over 70%\) to a 2.1 \(over 60%\) to a 2.2 \(over 50%\) to a third \(Over 40%, which is the pass mark\).](#)

^{vi} Our prior experience of bolting on skills in a designated skills-based module had been consistently poor, with many students deciding to ignore much of the content.

^{vii} We recognize that part of the shifting ethos in HE is that it is increasingly difficult to get students to undertake new or strange tasks without the accompanying instrumentalized rationality as to its wider purpose of securing a 2:1.

^{viii} In fact, this article by Jenkins et al (2011) was written as a direct result of participation in a symposium on the use of auto/biographical methods organized by members of the 'Pedagogic quality and inequality in first degrees' project.

^{ix} The NSS is offered to final years students and the results are publicly available and draw media attention. The score refers to the percentage of participants who "definitely" or "mostly" agree that their overall experience was satisfactory. High-status universities tend to get the higher scores and the average is 86%.

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